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ABSTRACT

Across the nation, governors are leading reform efforts to transform their public education systems to meet world-class standards and the National Education Goals. In the midst of controversy about school restructuring, governors are faced with the challenge of defining a middle ground. The National Governors' Association (NGA) identified some of the most troublesome barriers to systemic reform efforts: (1) a lack of clear direction for school reform compounded by leadership turnover; (2) weak incentives for change, especially in urban districts; (3) a regulatory and compliance mentality that focuses on procedures rather than results; (4) limited and ineffective learning opportunities for educators; and (5) poor communication inside and outside the education system. In April 1995, the NGA convened a meeting with state and local policymakers, editors, and community members to discuss strategies for overcoming the barriers. This brochure summarizes the lessons from the meeting and NGA's ongoing conversations with governors' policy advisors and educators, offering guidelines for finding common ground in education reform. (LMI)

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TRANSFORMING EDUCATION

FINDING THE MIDDLE GROUND

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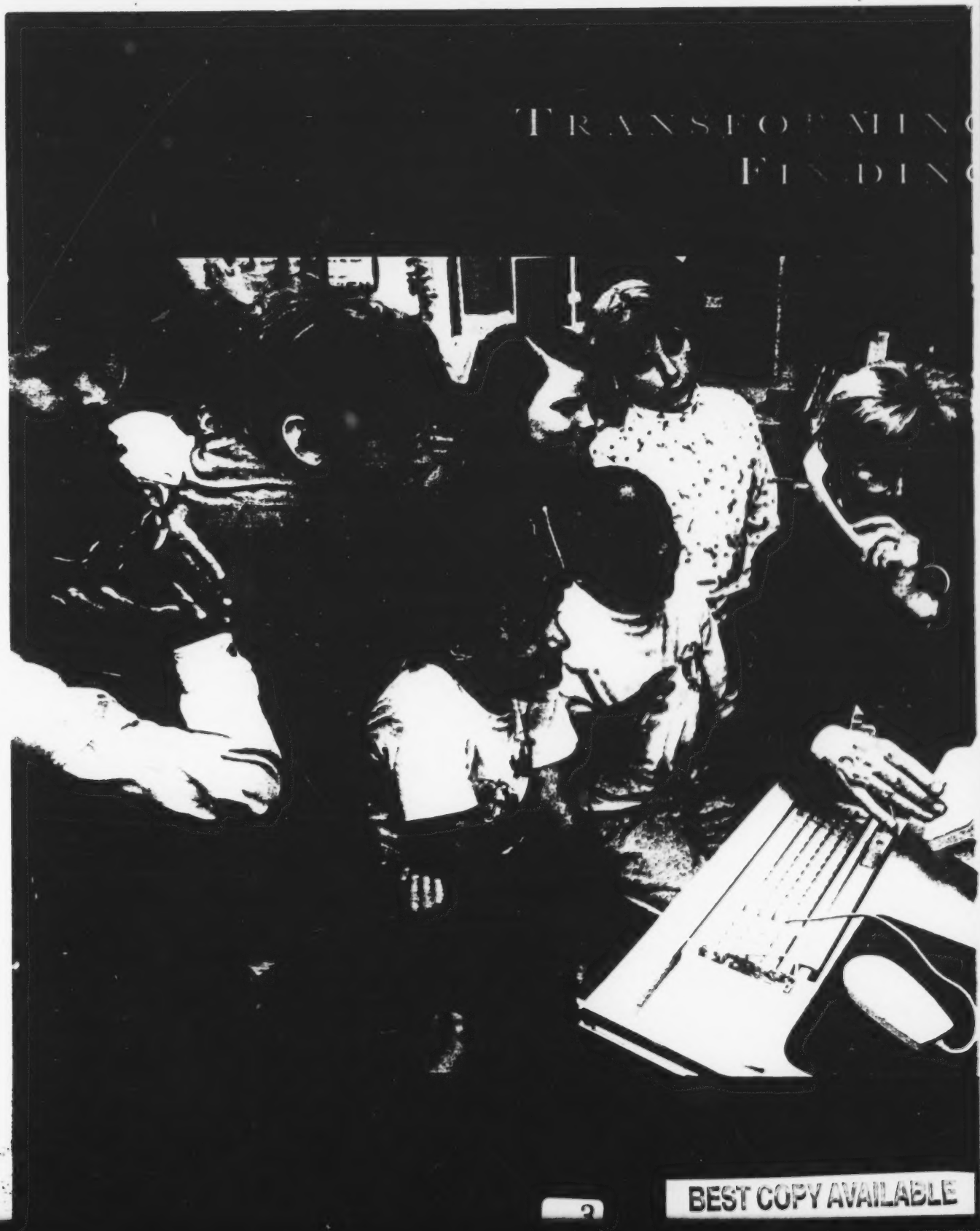

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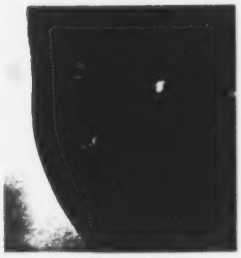

EDUCATION SYSTEMS: THE MIDDLE GROUND

Introduction

Across the nation, Governors are leading reform efforts to transform their public education systems to meet world-class standards and the National Education Goals. These efforts represent a significant shift in the focus of education policy, from piecemeal changes to systemwide reforms and from resource inputs to student performance.

These comprehensive reform efforts are proving harder to launch and slower to implement than expected. Constituents hold a range of viewpoints about what schools should look like, leaving Governors with the challenge of defining a middle ground. Governors must formulate an agenda that accommodates differing views and brings people together without compromising the ultimate goals of systemic reform.

Every state inevitably encounters barriers that slow even the most ambitious efforts. With support from the Lilly Endowment, the National Governors' Association (NGA) has identified some of the most troublesome barriers to systemic reform efforts. A 1993 report, ***Transforming Education: Overcoming Barriers,*** **focused on the five most salient:**

- *a lack of clear direction for school reform compounded by leadership turnover;*
- *weak incentives for change, especially in large urban districts;*
- *a regulatory and compliance mentality that focuses on procedures rather than results;*
- *limited and ineffective learning opportunities for educators; and*
- *poor communication both inside the education system and with the broader community.*

Given the large number of new Governors and their strong interest in education reform issues, NGA convened a group of state and local policymakers, educators, and community members in April 1995 to update its work and discuss examples of successful strategies for overcoming these barriers. This brochure summarizes the lessons from that meeting and from NGA's ongoing conversations with Governors' policy advisors and educators. It is intended to serve as a guide to Governors in their quest to create a common ground on which education reform can flourish.

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among citizens' differing viewpoints about what schools shou

Progress & Roadblocks

There is considerable reform activity across the states. Committed to a bipartisan agenda to improve student performance, states are developing standards and trying out new forms of assessment. They are creating new accountability structures designed to stimulate more challenging curriculum and instruction for all students.

Although there is progress overall, it is far from sure and steady. Transforming the nation's public education system into one that equips all children to meet the challenges of citizenship and workplace productivity in the twenty-first century is not a simple task. It is clear that achieving the goals of education reform will take time, from developing standards to building professional capacity. It will also require sustained leadership and clear communication with the public.

The public supports the general concept of adopting challenging standards for all students and developing related assessments that measure students' skills and knowledge. Yet the process of writing technically sound and broadly supported standards and assessments has taken much longer than expected. Without these new standards and assessments in place, accountability systems flounder, either from a reliance on inappropriate measures or from the inability to figure out how to aid failing school systems.

Higher achievement standards, by themselves, are not enough to bring about the goals of reform. Also needed is an education workforce that has the skills and knowledge to teach to high standards and the flexibility to create school environments that support such teaching. States are recognizing the need to build ongoing adult learning into the education system so that teachers and administrators can keep abreast of the latest knowledge and technology.

At the same time, many teachers and administrators—and even students and parents—have seen reforms come and go and are slow to believe that the nation is serious about education reform. Similarly, the general public rarely understands the highly technical language used by policymakers and educators. Oftentimes, resistance to reform is based more on misunderstandings than on real differences of opinion.

For this to change, each state needs leadership that focuses attention on the long-term goals and seeks to find common ground among citizens' differing viewpoints about what schools should look like.

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Overcoming Barriers

In convening the national meeting and reviewing state progress in implementing reforms over the last few years, NGA asked whether the barriers had changed significantly from the initial study. They have not changed. Educators and citizens are still confused about the direction of reform. They wonder how schools in destitute neighborhoods can effectively address academic issues while dealing with problems of violence, race, and poverty. People are also frustrated by the layering of new reforms on top of old with little attention paid to decreasing the regulatory burden placed on schools.

Understanding what stands in the way of reform is the first step in moving past these barriers. The lessons learned so far offer guidance on how to overcome and even avoid some barriers, and, importantly, how to set realistic expectations for the progress of reform.

Lack of Clear Direction. More than forty states are in the process of creating new standards, and a number are developing new kinds of assessments tied to the standards. These actions send powerful signals of new directions in curriculum and instruction, but they take time to develop and implement. When new standards and assessments are created while old tests stay in place, teachers, students, and parents become confused about what is expected. This problem is exacerbated when the new assessments are radically different from previous tests, with educators and parents tending to support what is more familiar.

State leadership is critical in sending a clear signal about new directions and in ensuring that reforms are balanced, blending what has worked well in the past with what is needed for the future. It is a challenge to sustain such political leadership when the individuals in key leadership posts, from Governors and chief state school officers to local superintendents and school board members, are constantly changing.

Public education reforms cannot succeed if strategies are effective on
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Taking Action

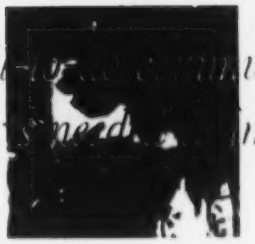
TAKING ACTION. Governors can maintain a focus on education, even when they are new to office and favor different strategies than their predecessors. In fact, as a group, Governors have been remarkably consistent in their commitments to achieving the National Education Goals and to implementing the systemic changes needed to reach them.

Governors can help by ensuring that state education agencies are responsive to constructive criticism and adapt programs accordingly as lessons emerge. State education agencies in both Kentucky and Vermont have demonstrated this kind of responsiveness throughout the development of their cutting-edge assessment systems. Such openness is especially important when states develop high-stakes accountability systems, which require assessments that are demonstrably fair and reliable and take considerable time and resources to create.

In addition, Governors can activate and draw attention to organizations that support the goals of education reform. These include organizations working at the local level to help school boards and communities improve the way schools are governed. They also include consortia of states collaborating in the development of new standards and assessments as well as organizations working on standards-driven reform in licensure. Such collaborations can help sustain the momentum of reform even as political leadership changes.

The systemic reform agenda requires major changes from everyone in the education system. Without sustained and clear direction signaled by ambitious standards and reinforced by challenging assessments and curriculum, the difficult individual and organizational transformations are unlikely to occur.

in well-to-do communities. Reform agendas must incorporate, through collaboration with other agencies and with local communities, the extra supports needed to implement education reforms in poor communities.



Weak Incentives for Change. In many states, education reform faces increasing competition for decreasing fiscal resources. Moreover, it is difficult to differentiate the unique responsibilities of state education systems, relative to those of other institutions, especially in areas where problems related to race, poverty, and violence are severe. When communities are overwhelmed by feelings of despair, education reform rhetoric falls on deaf ears. Educators are unable to focus on changing instructional practices, and parents are unlikely to support such changes, when safety is their paramount concern. No longer a problem confined to large urban areas, this obstacle is increasingly visible in suburban areas and small cities.

Taking Action

Taking Action. State policy can acknowledge, through funding and assistance mechanisms, that some schools require more guidance, help, and equipment than others. In some communities, the whole civic infrastructure may need rebuilding.

Governors can deputize entire communities and bring all interested parties to the table. External funding agents, both public and private, are targeting this challenge and may prove to be part of the solution. Schools of choice, charter schools, and similar mechanisms by which schools self-select to provide innovative programs offer good alternatives for some students. For Governors, however, the question remains whether these approaches can become solutions for everyone and, if not, who will serve the rest.

Governors can also direct states to study options for providing intensive help to schools in trouble, recognizing that sanctions such as state takeovers and school closures are stop-gap measures at best. As new accountability mechanisms are implemented, new approaches are needed to provide sustained assistance to schools that are not serving their students well.

Public education reforms cannot succeed if strategies are effective only in well-to-do communities. Reform agendas must incorporate, through collaboration with other agencies and with local communities, the extra supports needed to implement education reforms in poor communities.

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Regulatory and Compliance Mentality. Recently enacted state and federal laws attempt to hold schools more accountable and grant them greater regulatory flexibility. Yet efforts by Governors to remove burdensome regulations have not been very successful. Policymakers at each level of the system find it far easier to add new mandates than to remove old ones. Even in states where results-oriented approaches to education exist, regulations govern procedural details. Where states provide flexibility through blanket waivers, they tend to reward schools that are already successful. Few would argue that failing schools and districts should be deregulated. Nevertheless, more attention needs to be given to the negative effects of restrictive regulations on schools attempting to improve.

Taking Action

Taking Action. Governors can press policymakers to move beyond waivers. The goal of flexibility—giving schools the authority and freedom to make desired improvements—is not attained by asking educators to identify rules that get in their way. It is attained by providing teachers with examples of desired practices and ensuring that they have the skills, knowledge, and authority to put them in place.

Governors can also lead efforts to eliminate policies that unfairly restrict or penalize all schools for a few "bad apples" that encourage the misuse of funds. Governors can ensure that attempts to increase flexibility do not simultaneously reduce resources or deprive certain students of access to quality education.

Schools, districts, and state agencies cannot change their ways of operating if they are under continual pressure to monitor compliance with a raft of regulations. Achieving the goals of systemic reform requires an appropriate balance—a middle ground—between necessary regulation and school autonomy.

systemic reform. Helping students reach ambitious standard
in turn requires new conceptions of professional developme

Taking Action

Limited Learning Opportunities for Educators. Higher standards for students call for different approaches to teaching. Teachers need time and opportunities to rethink how they teach, to learn new subject matter, and to keep abreast of research on learning. Similarly, administrators need opportunities to learn about the structures and supports needed to put new teaching practices in place. Such opportunities for educators are scarce and are the first to be cut when budgets are tight. Even when substantial professional development resources are available, the types of learning opportunities offered are often inadequate with regard to their content, structure, and incentives for participation. Too often, institutions of higher education are part of the problem, not part of the solution. (For more information, see the National Governors' Association series of publications on Professional Development and Capacity for Change.)

Taking Action. Governors can lay the groundwork for a more radical rethinking of the profession, including how much of a teacher's workday should be spent with students and how much should be spent tending to other responsibilities, including ongoing professional learning.

Governors can stimulate alternative approaches to professional development by calling attention to successful tools and practices, such as professional networks and workplace-embedded learning, and by pressing for a reexamination of current incentive systems for teacher preparation and continuing education.

Governors can also direct appropriate state agencies to document how much money is spent on professional development activities, what it buys, and how effective these activities are. Such an analysis can form the basis for shifting funds from ineffective activities, which typically include in-service days and continuing education credits, to more effective practices, including professional development schools and teacher networks.

Investing in building the capacity of educators is fundamental to systemic reform. Helping students reach ambitious standards requires teachers and administrators to learn new practices, which in turn requires new conceptions of professional development.

Creating a workable agenda for systemic reform requir
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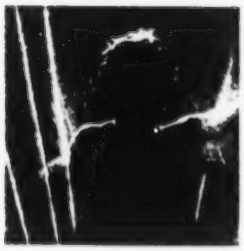

Poor Communication. Education reforms cannot be initiated and sustained without support from educators and the general public. To gain such support, state education agencies must communicate clearly and regularly with parents, educators, and business and community leaders about their goals and intentions. Most parents and educators support the concept of education reform, including a desire for safe schools, a belief in the importance of mastering basic skills, and the expectation that education should expand an individual's opportunities. Yet the rhetoric of reform often results in extreme-sounding or obscure messages that trigger negative reactions.

There is more room for consensus around goals and standards than highly publicized controversies suggest. Reform leaders must find ways to engage both educators and the public in the development and implementation of new policies and practices. States that have ignored the need to communicate with and include the public in their reform efforts are now encountering serious problems in gaining public support for their proposals.

Taking Action

Taking Action. Governors can create public forums for debate and discussion on the purposes of education and ensure that all voices are heard, not just the loudest. Governors can push agencies to use simple language, to address people's concerns, and to avoid extremist rhetoric.

Governors can spotlight effective practices to help both educators and the public envision schools and classrooms that look very different from those of the past. Governors can also call attention to community and business organizations that are working to enhance local understanding and communication. These include organizations that facilitate discussions between parents and teachers and provide opportunities for people to observe and discuss the changing demands of the workplace.

Governors can also set an example by using positive language that motivates people and institutions to change, instead of the language of a failed system, which creates defensiveness and resistance.

Creating a workable agenda for systemic reform requires considerable public debate and negotiation to ensure that the language of the agenda accommodates a range of beliefs about public education.

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THE POLITICS OF REFORM: WHAT GOVERNORS CAN DO

Governors are in a powerful position to overcome perhaps the single most difficult barrier to transforming education —a lack of support from educators, parents, and the general public. By taking steps to define a middle ground that attracts support from a broad range of people, Governors can play a key role in keeping reform initiatives on track.

- *Governors can help stake out a middle ground that captures the valid concerns of all citizens about their schools. In so doing, they can ask the following questions about proposed changes.*
  - *Do the proposed changes balance what has worked well in the past with new knowledge about effective teaching practices?*
  - *Do they measure desired achievement goals for students?*
  - *Do they ensure that all children will be served well?*
- *Governors can encourage others to think systemically and act strategically. Within the context of a long-term systemic plan, it often works best to focus on a few key components such as assessment and deregulation.*
- *Governors can encourage agencies to adjust, not abandon, reform strategies that are not having the desired results. It is important to use feedback to make mid-course adjustments instead of changing policy directions every few years.*
- *Governors can honor both small and large successes as well as the struggles they entail.*
- *Governors can keep education reform on track by focusing public attention on the important role that strong public education systems play in securing the political and economic future of the states and the nation.*

Given the large number of new Governors, there are significant opportunities to reinvigorate education reform efforts. Conflicts will continue to arise, signaling that change is underway. Citizens have genuine differences in their beliefs about education and in their access to educational resources. The critical underpinning of a sustained reform effort is leadership that focuses the public's energy on the ultimate goals of schooling and the essential role of education in preserving democracy.

Gubernatorial language that sets a tone of conciliation and shared commitment to public education is crucial to channeling differences into constructive action. No state can carry out education reform without gubernatorial leadership that cultivates patience and realistic expectations. A strong public education system does not result from any quick fix; it must be built over the long term through sustained leadership and attention. By staking out the middle ground, Governors can unite citizens around the goal of strengthening public education for all students.

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